Application for New Frontier Exploratory Travel Fellowship

I am applying for a New Frontier Exploratory Travel Fellowship to support research I would like to conduct at the Sophia Smith Collection and the Mortimer Rare Book Room, both at Smith College. In particular, I am interested in examining the Ms. magazine archives in the Sophia Smith Collection and the Sylvia Plath Collection in the Mortimer Rare Book Room. My research in both collections will contribute to a project I have tentatively titled “Sylvia Plath’s Debt to Ms. Magazine and the Feminist Movement.”

I first developed an interest in this topic while writing a book on Plath (Sylvia Plath and the Mythology of Women Readers, U of Massachusetts P, 2011) and at that time I began some preliminary research. I incorporated some of this initial research into a recent presentation I gave at the Sylvia Plath Symposium at Indiana University in October 2012. This talk focused on two early issues of Ms. magazine, one that featured a preview of Sylvia Plath’s soon-to-be-published poem “Three Women,” and a second just several months later that featured a long essay on Plath by Harriet Rosenstein. At present, my argument about these two Ms. issues considers the interaction between the various magazine components as they relate to Plath (e.g., the cover of the first issue, the themes of the Plath poem, and the questions about Plath’s status as author raised by Rosenstein). After delivering the talk and receiving feedback and encouragement from Karen Kukil (Associate Curator of Special Collections at Smith College who oversees the Plath collection and who was in the audience for my talk), I am eager to expand my examination of Plath’s visibility in these early issues of the magazine. Kukil is also the one who alerted me to the fact that Smith College had recently acquired the Ms. papers, which fortuitously are now being cataloged with a June deadline for completion.

During my visit to the Sophia Smith Collection, I plan to examine the early papers (circa 1970-1973) in the Ms. collection to unearth any correspondence or other documentation that might illuminate the editorial decisions that led to the features on Plath. I am also interested in examining the fan mail the magazine received that might have been pertinent to Plath and “Three Women” (historians of the magazine have noted that the first issues of Ms. received an unprecedented number of letters from readers, but only a few of these letters have ever been examined or made public). Both research avenues will help me document the important role Ms. played in the development of not only Plath’s career but of a feminist literary culture in the 1970s.

Within the Plath archives, I plan to examine correspondence and other documentation that might illuminate Harriet Rosenstein’s contributions to early Plath scholarship. More specifically, I understand from senior Plath scholar Lynda Bundtzen, who knows the Plath archive well, that Rosenstein went on from the Ms. essay to complete a dissertation about Plath, only to see her dissertation sealed after the Plath estate (under the direction of Plath’s husband Ted Hughes)
threatened litigation. I would like to look through the archives to discover whether evidence of any exchange about Rosenstein—and other feminist critics of the time, for that matter—exists and what significance it might have for how we understand the relationship between the male literary establishment of the time and a burgeoning feminist literary (counter)culture.

Because this would mark my first visit to both archives, I am also interested in conducting a more general exploration. In fact, I am currently considering topics for a new book project, and I would like to explore the archives for possible new avenues. Recognizing that the Sylvia Plath collection is vast, I do have some preliminary directions to pursue, including a search for any evidence of additional incomplete or sealed projects like Rosenstein’s that may have been written about Plath, as well as documents that would shed light on the cultural history of Plath’s writing as it relates to early feminism. For example, I will pay close attention to any documents that evince Plath’s engagement with 1) debates about birth control and female sexuality in the fifties and early sixties, with 2) an emergent feminist literary culture, and with 3) other emergent feminist critiques of mainstream culture. Within the Ms. archives, I am especially interested in finding materials that will shed light on the impact Ms. had on the literary marketplace for women writers. Based on my knowledge of the literary reception of 20th century women’s writing in the U.S., I would argue that feminist magazines like Ms. had a profound impact on the literary culture of the 1970s that has not been adequately recognized, let alone documented. Given that I will be among the first scholars to visit the Ms. archives, my visit would represent an exciting opportunity to initiate that process of documentation and provide new evidence about the dynamic relationship between feminist literary culture and mainstream feminism.

My plan at this time is to spend almost three weeks in the two collections. I expect to discover significant material that will allow me to turn my conference presentation about Plath’s presence in Ms. magazine into a journal article, which I plan to complete in fall 2013 and submit to Tulsa Studies in Women’s Literature. I hope as well that my research in the two archives will become the foundation for a larger book project, either on Plath’s engagement with an emergent feminist culture or on the impact of feminist periodicals on the literary culture of the 1970s. Of course, should I discover insufficient material for a book project, I will approach my findings with an eye toward additional journal publications.

In closing, I would like to add that I believe I am especially well-suited to the projects I have outlined. As an established Plath scholar, I have made extensive use of the Plath archive at the Lilly Library at IU and the Ted Hughes archive at Emory University’s Manuscript, Archives, and Rare Book Library. In addition, my scholarship on Plath thus far has been praised for its careful and well-informed attention to feminist history and culture, its distinctive interdisciplinary approach and use of archival material, and its significant impact on the fields of study with it engages. I am eager to apply this experience and expertise to my exploration of two archives new to me.

Committee recommended for funding, final award amount: $3,000.
Note: This is a proposal for New Frontiers Exploratory Travel Fellowship. Budget justifications were not required when this proposal was submitted. As of July 2013, budget justifications are required for New Frontiers Exploratory Travel Fellowship.